

Soldiers *Online*

Becoming an

Story by SGT John Love

Each year more than 5,000 soldiers — volunteers twice over — join the proud ranks of the famed 82nd Airborne Division.

AS he sat on the tarmac waiting to board an Air Force C-130 at Pope Air Force Base, N.C., PFC Brian J. McEnerney still had trouble believing that 19 days earlier he had just arrived at the division after more than five months of training.

“I’ll probably be shaking right before I hook up,” McEnerney said. “But I’m more worried about my performance once I hit the ground.”

SGT John Love is a member of the 49th Public Affairs Detachment. SPC William Patterson also contributed to this story.

One day earlier, PVT Steven G. Smith wondered what he’d be thinking as he boarded the aircraft.

“I’ll probably be thinking, ‘Why am I getting ready to jump out of an airplane?’ and ‘please let my chute open.’”

McEnerney and Smith were now getting ready to parachute into the darkness 800 feet over the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, La., and spend the next month in “real” Army training with more than 650 other paratroopers from the 3rd Battalion, 325th Infantry Regiment.

While this was a new experience

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What it’s all about — the 82nd’s PFC Brian J. McEnerney undergoes a jumpmaster parachute inspection before boarding a C-130 for yet another jump.

"All American"



for them, for the majority of the battalion and the 15,000 paratroopers assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., it was just another day in the life of an "All-American" soldier.

Twice the Volunteer

Each year more than 5,000 soldiers are assigned to the division. Two-thirds of them come to the unit directly after graduating from basic training, advanced individual training and airborne school.

Getting there requires them to volunteer twice: the first time when they enlist and a second time when they volunteer for jump school.

"Everyone I knew was going to college, then they would go and join the rat race," McEnerney said in explanation of why he volunteered. "I thought joining the Army would be exciting. I had also read some books about the airborne and thought it would be neat to jump out of planes."

After months learning basic soldier skills, job specialties and airborne procedures, new paratroopers arrive at the 82nd eager to find what life in the division is like. The 82nd Replacement Detachment is the first stop.

"Our objective is to make sure when 'Joe' signs into his unit, he's ready to deploy within 18 hours," said SSG James Kates, the detachment's senior platoon sergeant.

During their week of paperwork, briefings and physical training, soldiers continue to wear the Battle Dress Uniform soft cap, rather than the



Soldiers new to the 82nd Airborne Division must perform a first jump in preparation for scheduled unit exercises.

distinctive maroon berets that identify them as paratroopers.

"It lets us easily identify new soldiers," said detachment 1SG James Matthews. "This way, if they make a mistake, we know to show them the correct way to do it rather than treating them like they've been in the division a while."

When the new paratroopers finally don their trademark headgear, they're greeted by representatives from their new units and escorted down Ardennes Street to where they'll spend their tour with the 82nd.

America's Guard of Honor

New paratroopers usually spend their first couple of weeks adjusting to how the division, their new unit and teammates do things. This includes

McEnerney changes the barrel of an M-60 machine gun during one of his squad's many training opportunities before their jump at JRTC.

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more paperwork and briefings to prepare them for the possibility of boarding a plane bound for somewhere in the world in 18 hours. Also during this time, the new paratroopers will endure long hours completing unit and physical training.

"I expected to be challenged during this time," said PVT Ryan Draeger, a utilities equipment repair specialist with Company B, 82nd Forward Support Bn. "I want to learn and progress, and to have a little more freedom than I did at basic."

For McEnerney and Smith, their first days with Weapons Squad, 1st Platoon, Co. B, were spent not only signing papers, but also getting ready for "war," as the battalion prepared for the JRTC deployment.

Preparation included a crash course in how the squad conducts business.

"We've had a lot of equipment layouts," Smith said. "We've also had classes on breaching obstacles, vehicle identification and the weapons used in the squad."

They also worked through maneuver drills with their squad, to make sure everyone knew what to do and when to step up in a combat situation, just in case the unit started taking casualties, said SSG Rodney Feliciano.

That "stepping up" could happen at any time during their mission. The two new soldiers were assigned as ammunition carriers on machine-gun crews, but if a crew member were taken out of action, the new soldiers would have to have the skill and confidence to take over. They must also know how the squad conducts patrols, and how to alert their teammates without alerting the enemy.

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That constant preparation helped the two feel more confident about the mission, "but, JRTC will be the real test," Smith said.

No Time to Unwind

When they're not training, paratroopers will find ways to relax, such

With each jump, soldiers gain the skills and confidence that mark each member of the 82nd Airborne Division.



Division paratroopers routinely train at Fort Bragg and at the training centers at Fort Polk, La., and Fort Irwin, Calif.

as going to a movie or visiting the Atlantic coast, but for McEnerney and Smith, there was a lot of catching up to do.

To help make sure the two were ready, squad members pitched in to make sure the new members had what they needed for the mission.

Their roommates helped them get

their gear together and trained them on some of their equipment, Feliciano said. But the two new soldiers also had to perform a first jump with the unit in preparation for their jump into JRTC.

"That was an easy one,"

McEnerney said when his first division jump was completed. "The one into JRTC is the one that scares me. I've never jumped with that much equipment before."

Put on Your Parachutes

Bad weather caused a one-day delay in the mission.

"Everyone was cheering at the news," Smith said. "I asked, 'Are we not jumping today?' and everyone was cheering at the bad weather in Louisiana."

But the next day, the battalion and its support elements were rigged up and waiting to load.

"This is what I expected with being here," McEnerney said. "But I didn't expect to be going on a field training exercise this soon after arriving."

Even with the short time to prepare, Feliciano said, they would do well on the ground.

And as they boarded the aircraft, the two new paratroopers were poised to join the ranks of other soldiers who have come before them and become "All-Americans." □

